

Only miracle to 'miracle liquid' is that people buy it

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers questions from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—In my junk box are 40 old buffalo nickels, most without dates. A coin dealer says I should buy a \$7.50 "miracle liquid" he sells that will bring back the worn-away numbers. How does the product work? Will my buffalo herd increase in value?

J.T., Chicago

A—Years ago hobbyists discovered that certain acids will dissolve microscopic amounts of metal on nickel coins, allowing worn-away digits to reappear faintly. But such "restored dates" have little value on the hobby market, in part because the acids leave dark smudges. In short, you may never recoup your \$7.50.

Q—A strange-looking symbol appears on my John F. Kennedy half dollars at the base of Kennedy's neck. Is it a Russian hammer and sickle, as a friend suggests?

E.W., Peoria

A—Hardly. You have noted the stylized initials of Gilroy Roberts, who designed the coin's "heads side." They often are mistaken for a hammer and sickle.

Q—I'm told that a 1960 "small date" Lincoln penny is exceedingly rare. How can I tell if my specimens are special? I have 340 such coins.

B.W., Oak Park

A—You should buy a hobby guidebook and compare the published pictures of 1960 "small date" and "large date" cents with your coins. But don't expect to make a fortune.

The "small dates" fetched fancy prices soon after their discovery in 1960, due in part to news media hype. But values dropped as collectors began finding huge quantities in circulation.

Today, a 1960-D "small date" in "typical uncirculated" condition retails for 10 cents or so; the 1960 no-mint-mark "small date" might bring \$2. The much more common "large dates" have almost no special value.

Government technicians created the varieties by using two master dies in making Lincoln cents during 1960.

Q—How much is an Illinois 50-cent coin worth?

O.B., Chicago

A—Most likely you are referring to the silver half dollar minted by Uncle Sam in 1918 to commemorate the state's centennial. A "typical uncirculated" specimen sells for \$75 to \$100; it depicts a clean-shaven Abe Lincoln and is legal tender for 50 cents.